UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

MOLECULAR ANALYSIS OF DICELOBACTER NODOSUS ISOLATED FROM FOOTROT INFECTED SHEEP IN MALAYSIA

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FPV 2001 7
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By

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Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine
Universiti Putra Malaysia

December 2001
Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2001

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Footrot has become an increasingly important disease of sheep in Malaysia. Therefore, the molecular analysis of the causative agent of footrot, Dichelobacter nodosus isolated from footrot infected sheep was undertaken. Fifteen D. nodosus isolates were recovered from 38 sheep showing clinical signs of footrot in two government sheep farms located approximately 200 km apart. The isolates were studied and results analysed. Preliminary identification of the organism was carried out by the Gram-stain method while the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) method using species-specific
primers, A and Ac, was employed for species confirmation. All 15 isolates produced a single product of approximately 780 basepairs. Although obtained from two different locations, all isolates were found to be of serogroup B. Two conventional methods, namely the elastase and gelatin-gel tests, were used to assess the virulence of the isolates. Generally, the isolates exhibited variations in the laboratory characteristics. Based on the virulence assessment, some of the isolates appeared to have the capability for causing virulent footrot but were isolated from sheep that did not show clinical signs of the virulent form of footrot. This was probably due to the constant topical treatment regime and the vaccination programme practised by the farm management which may have caused the bacteria to not fully express its virulence characteristics.

Analysis of the fimbrial subunit gene sequence revealed the local strains had sequences that are distinct from the prototype strains. There were 94 to 97 percent amino acid similarities (identities and conserved changes) between the local isolates and the prototype strains. The expression of *D. nodosus* fimbriae serotype B2 in an easily grown aerobe, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, were carried out successfully. *Dichelobacter nodosus* fimbrial subunit gene was cloned in an expression vector, pUCpKS downstream the lac promoter to construct the recombinant plasmid
pMAL99. Recombinant *P. aeruginosa* cells containing this construct were able to produce a high yield of fimbriae. The fimbriae were physically, structurally and antigenically indistinguishable from those produced by the *D. nodosus* isolates from which the fimbrial subunit gene was originally derived. This was shown and confirmed by Western blot analysis. When the fimbriae produced by the *P. aeruginosa* harbouring pMAL99 were extracted, purified and used as vaccines in sheep, the results conclusively showed that these vaccines were equally effective as either the native whole cells or isolated fimbriae from *D. nodosus* in eliciting the antibody response. The vaccinated sheep were found protected against homologous serogroup challenge. The recombinant fimbriae also produced cross-protective antibodies to heterologous serotypes B3 and B4 infections. Therefore, the monovalent serogroup specific recombinant vaccine has a good potential for use in farms in this country to protect sheep against footrot.
Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

ANALISIS MOLEKUL DICHÉLOBACTER NODOSUS YANG DIPENCILKAN DARI BEBI RI YANG MENGHIDAP REPUT KAKI DI MALAYSIA

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Penyakit reput kaki adalah penyakit yang semakin penting di Malaysia. Oleh itu, analisis molekul ke atas bakteria penyebab penyakit reput kaki, Dichelobacter nodosus yang dipencilkan dari bebiri yang menghidap penyakit reput kaki telah dijalankan. Lima belas isolat Dichelobacter nodosus telah dipencilkan dari 38 ekor bebiri yang menghidap penyakit reput kaki dari dua ladang kerajaan yang terletak lebih kurang 200 km di antara satu sama lain. Pencilan tersebut dikaji dan dianalisis. Diagnosis telah berjaya dilakukan melalui kaedah pewarnaan Gram sementara reaksi
polimerase rantai (PCR) dengan menggunakan primer spesifikasi, A dan Ac telah digunakan untuk konfirmasi spesies. Kesemua isolat didapati menunjukkan reaksi positif dalam kaedah PCR dengan menghasilkan satu produk 780 pasangan bes. Walaupun semua isolat dipencarkan dari dua lokasi yang berbeza, semuanya adalah dari satu serogroup B. Dua kaedah konvensional iaitu, ujian elastase dan gel-gelatin telah digunakan untuk menentukan tahap kevirulenan isolat. Secara amnya, isolat menunjukkan variasi dalam ciri-ciri kevirulenan di dalam makmal. Sesetengah isolat didapati mempunyai keupayaan menyebabkan tahap penyakit yang virulen, tidak menunjukkan tanda klinikal yang sedemikian. Ini mungkin disebabkan oleh rawatan topikal yang diamalkan oleh pihak pengurusan ladang dan mungkin juga hasil dari program vaksinasi yang menyebabkan bakteria tidak menunjukkan tahap kevirulenan sebenar.

Analisis jujukan gen fimbria menunjukkan isolat tempatan mempunyai jujukan yang berbeza dari strain prototaip. Terdapat 94 hingga 97 peratus persamaan (identiti dan penggantian konserve). Ekspresi fimbria serotip B2 \(D.\ nodosus\) di dalam bakteria aerobik, \(Pseudomonas\ aeruginosa\) telah berjaya dilakukan. Gen fimbria \(D.\ nodosus\) telah dikonklonkan ke dalam vector ekspresi, pUCpKS selepas kedudukan promotor \(lac\) untuk membentuk plasmid rekombinan pMAL99. Sel-sel rekombinan \(P.\ aeruginosa\) yang
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious, Most Merciful, I am thankful for giving me the strength, which has enabled me to complete this study.

I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Professor Dato' Dr. Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman for his invaluable advice, support and guidance. His encouragement and unbounded optimism has always kept my spirits high. I am also very grateful to Dr. Abdul Rahim Mutalib, who has spent so much time and effort to improve the quality of the thesis. Thanks also to Associate Prof. Dr. Mohd. Azmi Mohd. Lila and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Son Radu for their invaluable comments and suggestions throughout the duration of the study.

I thank the Department of Veterinary Services which kindly provided samples for this project and to Professor J.S. Mattick and Dr. C. Whitchurch of The University of Queensland and SEARCA for their help in enabling me to attend a training course on molecular biology in Australia. I also thank The Ministry of Science, Technology and
Environment, Malaysia for financial assistance through IRPA grants no. 51011 and 51488.

Special thanks to my husband, Hasnal Hashim whom I owe the most for his patience, understanding and support through this long and demanding project. I also express my greatest appreciation to my parents who have always encouraged me to reach new heights. I also extend my deepest love to my son, Harith Zahrin.

I am also indebted to all my friends especially Dr. Karim Al-Jashamy who helped me a lot in handling sheep for some of the experiments, Dr. Firoz Mian and Dr. Siti Khairani Bejo who were always there to lend a helping hand.

Finally, thanks to all the academic and support staffs of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine for their help and support during the course of the project.
I certify that an Examination Committee met on 12th December 2001 to conduct the final examination of Zunita binti Zakaria on her Doctor of Philosophy thesis entitled “Molecular Analysis of Dichelobacter nodosus Isolated from Footrot Infected Sheep in Malaysia” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations, which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

(ZUNITA BINTI ZAKARIA)

Date: 8/1/2002
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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Footrot is a contagious disease of ruminants, particularly sheep and goats although cattle and deer may also be affected. It is present worldwide and has a significant economic impact in sheep farming countries with a temperate climate and a moderate to high rainfall, such as Australia and New Zealand (Stewart, 1989). It is responsible for serious losses to the sheep industry in reduced meat and wool production, lowered fertility, and the high costs of labour and materials used in treating affected animals (Stewart et al., 1984; Marshall et al., 1991; Glynn, 1993). The disease is characterized by inflammation of the interdigital skin and hoof matrix leading to an underrunning and separation of the hoof from the epidermal tissues. Classical signs of footrot are severe lameness and pain with the infected animal preferring to walk on its knees when only the front feet are affected, or lying prone when all four feet are affected (White, 1991). The increasing awareness of animal welfare issues associated with footrot has brought the disease more into the forefront of the industry.
The main etiological agent of footrot is *Dichelobacter nodosus* formerly known as *Bacteroides nodosus* (Dewhirst *et al.*, 1990). It is a Gram-negative, strictly anaerobic, nonsporeforming bacteria. A culture of *D. nodosus* deposited in the American Type Culture Collection as accession no. 25549 has been designated the prototype strain (Skerman, 1989). *Dichelobacter nodosus* lives only in diseased hooves and survives no longer than 7-14 days in faeces, soil or pasture.

Footrot has become an increasingly important disease of sheep in Malaysia. Even though the disease is known to exist for the last two centuries in many parts of the world, it has only been detected in this country in the last six years (Yii, 1995). The first confirmed case of footrot in Malaysia occurred in a government sheep farm namely the Institut Haiwan Kluang, Johor; in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia in 1994. The disease is now present in other farms throughout the country. Importations of sheep were made from diverse countries such as Australia, Brazil and Thailand which might have brought the disease into the country.

Vaccines containing representative strains from all major serogroups incorporated into oil-based adjuvant have been available since 1981. They consist of a mixture of killed cultures of different serogroups (Walker, 1988). The conventional vaccines are very costly (Mattick
and Hobbs, 1990), thus, a genetically engineered vaccine was
developed. The fimbrial gene from prototype *D. nodosus* strains has
been cloned and expressed as extracellular fimbriae in an easily grown
aerobe, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. Fimbriae extracted from the
recombinant *P. aeruginosa* cells were used as vaccines against *D.
nodosus* infection.

Sheep farms in Malaysia started to use the commercial footrot
multivalent killed whole cells vaccines in late 1996. The vaccination
did reduce the prevalence of footrot but the strength and duration of
the immunity achieved was limited. The short duration of the
immunity is associated with a poor agglutinin response in animals
receiving multiple fimbrial antigens of *D. nodosus* simultaneously.
Moreover, a previous study on local *D. nodosus* isolates found them
to be antigenically different from the prototype strain (Zunita, 1998).
There is now a recurrence of the disease which has become worse
under conditions favouring the infection.

Therefore an extensive study is needed to obtain a comprehensive
knowledge about the etiological agent and to understand the situation
of the infection and the disease in the country. Conventional
eradication methods practised in the temperate countries are unlikely
to succeed in Malaysia where the weather is warm and humid throughout the year. The findings of the study will enable the formulation of suitable measures to control footrot.

The objectives of this study were:

(1) to isolate, identify and assess the virulence of *D. nodosus* from clinical cases of footrot in sheep kept in farms in Malaysia.

(2) to determine the relationship between fimbriae from different strains in Malaysia and the prototype strains by analysing the nucleotide as well as the amino acid sequences of the fimbrial subunit gene.

(3) to determine the possibility of producing a serogroup specific recombinant vaccine by cloning and expressing local *D. nodosus* fimbrial subunit gene in an aerobe surrogate host, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.

(4) to investigate the antigenic properties of a recombinant vaccine prepared from fimbrial genes of a local isolate in sheep.